

AlaskaDispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

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Bryce Edgmon

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Main Image:

Memorial Service for Thomas Madole - officer salute ^[1]

Main Image Caption:

Memorial service for VPSO Thomas Madole in Anchorage

On April 4 during this year's legislative session I introduced a bill to authorize Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) to carry firearms. Less than three weeks before HB199 was read across the House, the VPSO in Manokotak, a village just 20 air miles from my hometown of Dillingham, was shot to death in the line of duty.

The officer's name was Thomas Madole. He was a 54-year-old former pastor who took the job in Manokotak in 2011 because he wanted to help Bush communities at the grassroots level. I've been told that because of his warmth and his obvious goodwill, many Manokotak residents considered Officer Madole family.

Along with many people across Alaska, I was deeply upset by his death. However, I thought very carefully before putting forward HB199. As chairman of Finance budget subcommittees for both the Department of Public Safety and the Department of Corrections, I have long understood that our best investments are in preventing crime rather than responding after the fact. I know guns will not solve the many problems that contribute to violence in our communities, but as I told friends and colleagues back in April, I don't think it's fair or reasonable to continue to ask these first responders to walk unarmed into situations that pose such obvious dangers, and if allowing VPSOs to carry firearms will result in a modest deterrent to behavior in our villages that leads to tragedy, it must be done.

Thomas Madole was not the first VPSO to lose his life in the line of duty. I've not forgotten the 1986 slaying of VPSO Ronald Zimin, who was shot as he responded to a domestic violence call in South Naknek, a village also not far

from my hometown on Bristol Bay. And the Department of Public Safety has records of dozens of physical attacks on village officers, some of them life-threatening. These officers work often without backup in remote locations where a call to the Alaska State Troopers can mean hours before help arrives.

I want to note that HB199 does not require VPSOs be armed. Instead, it gives the VPSO program that option by stating that officers who meet minimum training standards may not be prohibited from carrying firearms. In drafting the legislation, we consulted closely with Public Safety Commissioner Joe Masters ^[2], himself a former VPSO who cares deeply about the program.

The choice the bill provides is important. While the state funds the VPSO program and the Department of Public Safety provides officers training and administrative support, Alaska's regional Native associations actually hire the officers and work with the communities where they are posted. Many communities have welcomed the option for firearms, while a few have expressed reservations. The wishes of individual communities must be respected, and everyone involved must have a thorough understanding of the issues surrounding arming these officers.

On Sept. 26, the Legislative Information Office in Anchorage will conduct a hearing so major stakeholders can give these matters careful consideration. Officials from every regional Native association in the state have been invited, as have active VPSOs, officials from the Department of Public Safety, the Alaska Native Justice Commission, and other state legislators.

The 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. meeting will be streamed via the Web on <http://alaskalegislature.tv/> ^[3]. If your community has a local Legislative Information Office, you can also watch there.

Everyone who has been invited to attend shares my desire not only to better protect our VPSOs but also to make communities safer. Ultimately, this hearing is about improving the well being of all rural Alaskans. I'm confident there is widespread support for that goal.

Rep. Bryce Edgmon (D-Dillingham) is chairman of the House Bush Caucus and represents communities from the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers south across Bristol Bay and east to the shores of Cook Inlet.

Source URL: <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20130913/should-alaskas-vpsos-be-armed-protect-themselves-their-communities>

Links:

[1] <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/image/memorial-service-thomas-madole-officer-salute>

[2] <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/alaskas-top-cop-inupiaq-joe-masters-aims-improve-village-safety>

[3] <http://alaskalegisature.tv/>